

'Ryan's Notes from the Road'

Senior Chief Terry Ryan is assigned to the Naval Technical Training Center at Naval Air Station Meridian — Lauderdale County's single largest employer. But, the logistics specialist received TAD orders (or orders for "temporary additional duty") to the Multi-National Security Transition Command in Baghdad, Iraq.

A 24-year Navy veteran, Terry is originally from Vandalia, Ohio. He enjoys fishing and reading and is working toward a bachelor's degree in marketing at Mississippi State University-Meridian Campus.

What does he miss most? "Walking my canine companion, Henry, with my wife, Lisa Sunday."

The most amazing thing about Terry's letter home to Meridian is his ability to keep his dry sense of humor intact in what are, for all of his kidding, dangerous surroundings.

By Terry Ryan

special to The Star

Greetings from the "Cradle of Civilization" — or as I like to call it, "When is the Wal-Mart opening?"

After I got my orders, I had a short get-to-know-the-Army stay at Fort Bliss, Texas, where I saw the first snow of the season and was introduced to neat things like MREs (Meals Ready to Eat), combat boots, Army chow and my new girlfriend, Miss M-16. I have yet to name "her," but I've cleaned it a few times.

While at Fort Bliss, we packed a lot of training into five days. Everything from first aid, chemical attack, that the Navy has a good dental plan, cultural awareness, STDs, that I am losing my hearing and how to score with my new girlfriend.

The best part of the long flight to Kuwait was sitting in first class. As the senior enlisted man, I was required to be near the senior officer on the flight.

My job was basic crowd control. This was easy because no alcohol was served. Good thing because the crowd was a mixture of military and civilians, private contractors and government employees.

Arriving in Iraq

We were in Kuwait for less than 24 hours before our flight to Iraq. The flight into Iraq was the by far the worst flight I have ever been on.

The reason is that the pilot had to land the aircraft (a C-130) in a maneuver called combat landing, as opposed to the outgoing flight which will be a combat take-off. A normal landing or take-off is a long slow horizontal climb or descent.

A combat landing is a steep climb or descent in a tight, circular (just like a

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corkscrew) motion. I nearly lost my breakfast, broke out in a sweat and had a hard time breathing. I am not looking forward to the flight out of here — not the ride portion anyway. The reason for the tight circle is the possibility of being targeted by missiles.

My next adventure was the ride from the airport to the Green Zone (think of the Green Zone as a safe area, i.e. you beat the throw to second base).

The mode of transportation for this leg is normally a bus they call the "Steel Rhino." The "Steel Rhino" is an armored bus (think short yellow, in this case tan, bus with bullet-proof windows) that travels with at least two armored Humvees with 50-caliber automatic weapons.

Well, that was not to be. "Why?" you may ask. Go ahead and ask, I'm waiting.

The road between the airport and Baghdad was too dangerous to travel by convoy. So, we traveled the few miles to our new home by helicopter.

Mortar attacks

Shortly after arriving at my new command, I experienced my first mortar attack.

Shortly after arriving at my new tent, which I shared with 30 of my closest friends, I experienced my second mortar attack. Every night for the next four nights, between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m., the insurgents would send into the Presidential Palace Compound where my tent is located, three mortar rounds.

By the second night, I said "the H with it" and stayed in my tent instead of heading for the bunker. The insurgents were firing for effect. The only thing the insurgents could hit with a mortar is the ground, and that is only by the grace of gravity.

During my first 10 days in the country, I toted around my flak vest (35 pounds) and Kevlar helmet (4 pounds).



SUBMITTED PHOTO

SAND AND DUST

Senior Chief Terry Ryan, currently stationed in Baghdad, says Camp Victory is sandy and dusty. As he describes it, "the kind of dust that is baby powder fine, the kind of dust that will find its way into a vacuum-packed jar, the kind of dust that, when a sand flea breaks wind, a cloud of dust fills the air."

Not that I'm complaining, I still have all the parts I came here with.

Bad taste and plenty of dust

I will try to describe the Presidential Palace. It's huge. Some of the tile work is artfully done, some is not. Some of the craftsmanship is magnificent, some not so much.

Or, could it be that all of the abuse the palace received before, during and after the war has taken its toll? In most cases, I will agree.

However, I would have questioned some of the recommendations the interior designers made. Was it that the government had bad taste, or, the designers had it out for the government?

Whatever it was, some rooms and even sections of hallways had mismatched marble tiles. Colors, textures and even orientation are all befuddled. The mosaic work on the ceiling is all hand-carved and painted.

I have a goal. It is good to have goals. Well, mine is to avail myself of all the bathrooms I have access to in the palace. Is it achievable? Yes, I believe so. It's the little things in life ...

Life here in Camp Victory is full of sand and dust, the kind of dust that is baby powder fine. The kind of dust that will find its way into a vacuum-packed jar. The kind of dust that, when a sand flea breaks wind, a cloud of dust fills the air. Shall I go on?

Here I am surrounded by GIs and we are separated by a common language. I am learning to speak GI. Water Point is where cases of bottled water are stored for distribution. Fuel Point is where vehicles are filled with fuel. Mess Hall is where one goes to eat. Latrine is where one goes to evacuate what one just ate ... "S#*&S@! get out of the way. I have Saddam's Revenge."

It's not so bad

Life here is really no worse than being on a six-month tour at sea. In some aspects, it's even better. I can walk in a straight line for 1,000 feet without banging my shin into a knee knocker, or going up or down a ladder, or having to open a water-tight hatch. However, I do miss the Chief's Mess.

I am learning two languages, Arabic and Fijian. The security detail that guards the warehouse, where I work, is made up

of all Fijians. You might wonder why retired Fijian soldiers are guarding a warehouse full of weapons and ammo purchased for the Iraqi armed forces.

Well, the warehouse is located on the grounds of the International Airport, run by the Iraqi government (not really), and is operated by a private contractor (not KBR). The private contractor, Skylark, hired their own security detail. My work consists of quality assurance and materiel distribution.

The USO show arrived in town today. Robin Williams was a blast. John Elway was inspiring. Lee Ann Tweeden was stunning.

The show started with the 1st Cavalry's own garage band playing a wide assortment of music. Some of the band members perform well with their chosen instruments; others need to keep their day jobs. The crowd was appreciative of their efforts on a cold morning. After the show Robin, John and Lee Ann signed autographs. Not everyone was able to obtain the desired signature because of long lines and short time.

Well, it is time to bring this edition of "Ryan's Notes from the Road" to a close. Until next time, keep your stick on the ice.

Bragging rights

"My uncle, Jeff Skinner, is a staff sergeant in the Mississippi Army National Guard's 185th Aviation Unit, Company G, in Meridian. He is 36 years old and a full-time crew chief on the Chinook helicopter. He will be coming home in February or March and we are very proud of him ... We have missed him and prayed for his safe return. I would like to be in the U.S. Navy when I grow up and serve my country."

Daniel Powell, Little Rock



Powell

military. We love him so much and can't wait for his safe return home from overseas."

Jerry and Dianne Thornton, Carthage

This message is for Spc. Jason Griffin of the Mississippi Army National Guard's 185th Aviation Group, Company G, in Meridian. He is in the Army and he had to go to war with a lot of other people and I miss him. I am glad there are people like Uncle Jason who fight for our country to keep it free and safe."

Haley Griffin, Decatur



Griffin

This message is for Sgt. Jackie Abercrombie of the Mississippi Army National Guard's 185th Aviation Group, Company G, in Meridian: "Thank you and your unit for your unselfishness in serving your country in Iraq. I know you all miss your home and family, but are serving to the best of your ability. We just

want you all to know that we appreciate your sacrifice to your country. We pray for your safe return."

Connie Wiggins' 5th grade class Crestwood Elementary School

"I want to brag on Pvt. Chad Williams of the Mississippi Army National Guard's 150th Combat Engineer Battalion, Company A, because he is a great nephew and person."

"He has courage, faith, a very loving heart and smile that is blinding. He enlisted after the war had started in Iraq. He said he wasn't married and had no children. He wanted to go so he could replace one of the other soldiers who had been over there for a year or more."

"I pray God will give him the strength to get through this and come home with that bright smile. We accept the fact this is what he wanted to do. We love him so much. This is just a little bit of why his family is so proud to have him in our lives. He's only 21 years old but very much a man and unselfish."

Debbie Penny, Little Rock

This message is for Spc. Les Cummings of the Mississippi Army National Guard's

185th Aviation Group, Company G. "I am your mom's aunt and it has been years since I've seen you, and I hope it won't be long before you are at home and I can see you again. I want to thank you for serving our country in Iraq. Your mom and I have corresponded by e-mail for some time now and she is very eager for you to return home to the United States ... When you get home, I am looking forward to your telling me about some of your experiences in Iraq."

Nell R. Wakefield, Florence